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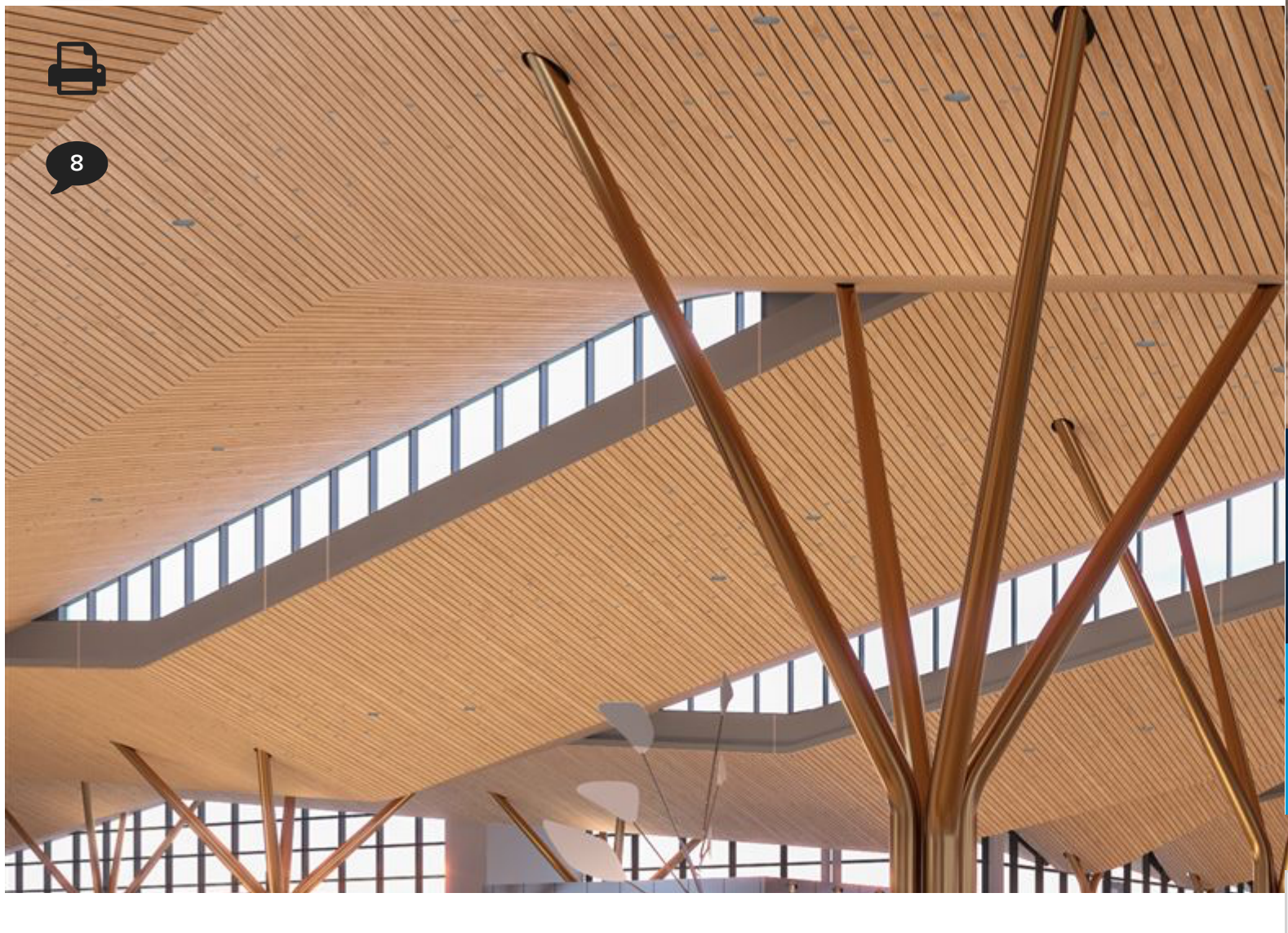

European tapped to design Pittsburgh International's new terminal was inspired by the city and its people

Luis Vidal visited Pittsburgh three times to research the city, traveling on foot, on a bicycle and by car

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Luis Vidal took it all in as he walked through Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal.

Airport officials were holding a ribbon-cutting and open house last month when a couple on the arrivals level — assuming he was an airport official because of his suit and tie — stopped Mr. Vidal and asked where international arrivals would enter once the terminal opens.

Mr. Vidal answered them, then pointed out the hallway where international and domestic arrivals will soon merge, and the outdoor terraces where passengers will be able to meet their families upon arrival.

The couple asked several follow-up questions. Mr. Vidal answered them all.

Adam Babetski
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"They said, 'How do you know all of this?' " Mr. Vidal recalled. "And I said, 'Well, I'm the architect!' "

Pittsburgh International Airport's new $1.7 billion landside terminal is set to open any day — although airport officials have been coy about naming an official date.

Mr. Vidal is the Spanish architect who walked through the new terminal that day, viewing the manifestation of what started as a rendering in his studio eight years ago.

Shortly after speaking to the couple, he overheard a woman explaining to her daughter how the columns supporting the terminal's ceiling resembled trees — exactly the effect Mr. Vidal had been trying to achieve.

"Extremely fulfilling," Mr. Vidal said of the experience. "I was extremely honored to be there that day."

'NaTeCo' defined

During the design phase, Mr. Vidal visited Pittsburgh three times to research the city.

He traveled on foot, on a bicycle and by car. He spoke to as many people as he could.

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Through 3 decades and 3 terminals, these Pittsburgh airport employees have seen it all

One day, he gave a lecture at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Architecture. Another, he went up and down the Duquesne Incline.

"I tried to understand what Pittsburgh was about," he said.

Mr. Vidal coined a new word for his terminal design philosophy — *NaTeCo* — because he wanted the project to combine Pittsburgh's most obvious traits: nature, technology and community. He came up with the word after visiting the Heinz History Center, which had an exhibit on Pittsburghese, explaining words like yinzer and dahntahn.

So Mr. Vidal thought: "Why can't we contribute a new word?"

Nature was the first part of the design, Mr. Vidal said, because Pittsburgh has one of the densest urban tree canopies in America — covering more than 40% of the city.

Technology came next and was inspired in part by CMU's expertise with robotics, Uber's experiments in Pittsburgh with drones and driverless cars, and UPMC's world-renowned organ transplant program, he said.

One of 38 "tree" support columns, inspired by Western Pennsylvania's nature, are part of Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal.
(Courtesy of Luis Vidal)

Community came as a natural byproduct of Mr. Vidal's visit to the city, he said, during which he met loyal fans of the Steelers, Pirates and Penguins, and learned more about the legacies of artists with Pittsburgh roots such as Andy Warhol and Alexander Calder.

Pittsburgh, Mr. Vidal said, is a "vibrant community, a very welcoming community. People are extremely friendly."

Working with light

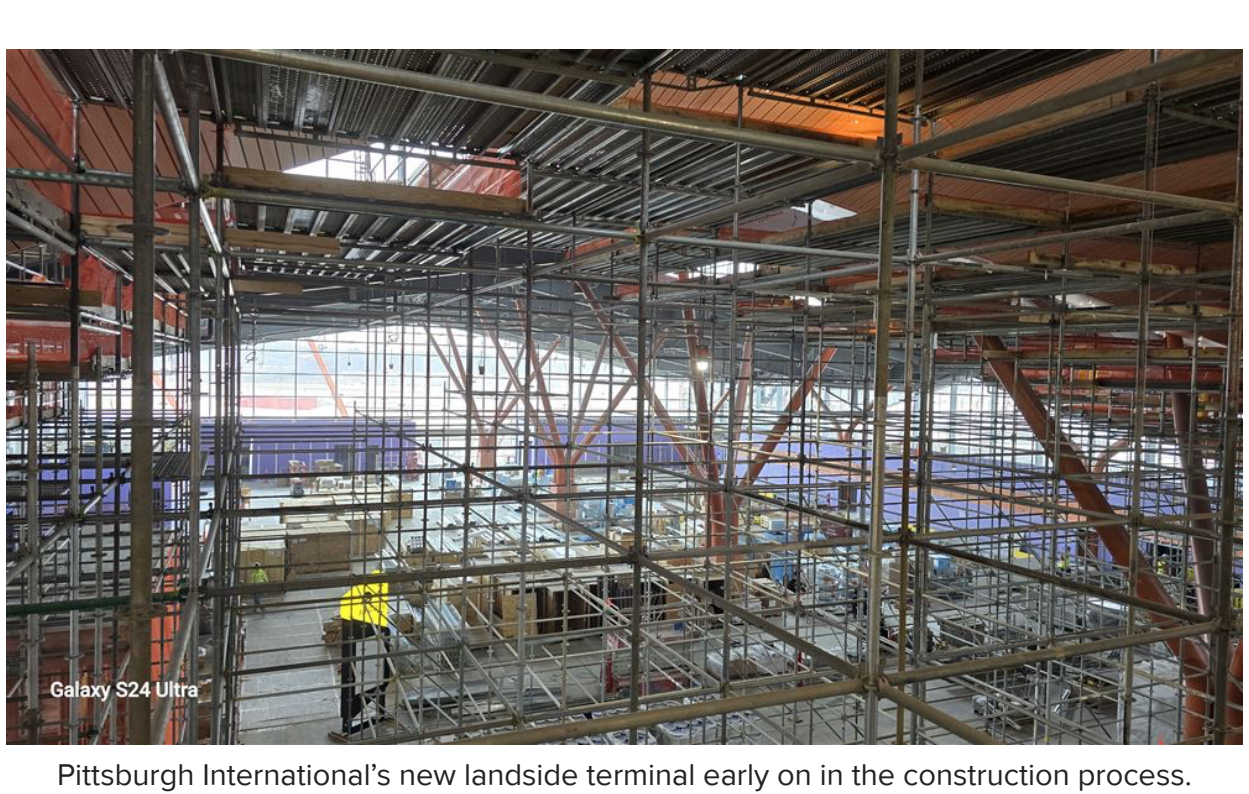
Mr. Vidal decided to incorporate nature into the Pittsburgh terminal's roof, which is meant to represent the "rolling hills" of Western Pennsylvania.

The roof's shaping isn't just for show — it will guide travelers toward the TSA checkpoint with "pockets of light" that shine through the gaps in the ceiling, Mr. Vidal said.

"I always say natural light is my favorite building material," he said.

Working with light comes with its own set of challenges, though. You cannot have too much or too little, you cannot induce glare, and you have to be cautious of the harmful effects of solar radiation and ultraviolet rays, Mr. Vidal said.

"You really have to take care of how you use natural light. And we did," he said, noting that, at night, when natural light isn't possible, lights embedded in the ceiling will simulate a starry sky.



Pittsburgh International's new landside terminal early on in the construction process.
(Courtesy of Luis Vidal)

Water was also a focus.

Rainfall will flow off the roof and filter into a retention tank that workers can use to irrigate the terminal's four outdoor terraces.

"Water collection is a responsibility of any architect today," Mr. Vidal said. "We have to be aware that water is a very scarce natural resource."

Mr. Vidal and his team of 150 worked with two other architectural firms, Gensler and HDR, on the project from the beginning. Primarily, Mr. Vidal and his architects drafted renderings, Gensler's team handled construction and HDR worked on the roadways, but all three groups had input on each leg of the project, he said.

"Maybe 95% of the effort was from us at the beginning, and that gradually drifted and changed as we went through the project phases," Mr. Vidal said.

Carolyn Sponza, of Gensler Pittsburgh, said airport officials provided architects with a project definition document that outlined features like the number of TSA checkpoints (12) and the general layout of the baggage system. Ms. Sponza and her team oversaw the workers who installed the building's concrete and steel base, aluminum and glass curtain walls and terrazzo flooring beginning in 2021.

'People are going to be taking selfies'

Mr. Vidal's original design called for a vast wooden ceiling, which was one of the few features that was later modified. The firms raised concerns about how the part of the ceiling that extended beyond the terminal's glass walls would withstand the elements.

"We wanted to make sure that one portion didn't weather differently than the other portion," Ms. Sponza said.

Gensler worked with Armstrong World Industries, a ceiling manufacturer based in Lancaster, to produce aluminum panels that look like wood.

"We had people walk underneath and see if they could tell the difference, and nine times out of 10 they couldn't," Ms. Sponza said.

Mr. Vidal, his team and Gensler then designed the 38 columns supporting the roof. The columns are designed to look like the aforementioned "trees" that sprout branches and are colored a blend of white, yellow, orange, red and brown meant to evoke Pennsylvania's foliage in the fall, Mr. Vidal said.

On the inside, the columns are filled with concrete to make them fire-resistant and strong enough to hold up the massive roof, Ms. Sponza said.

The "Petal Tunnel" just beyond the TSA checkpoint that connects the new terminal to the airside terminal is Mr. Vidal's favorite part of the project. It's a blend of nature and technology that serves as a "compression space" to get passengers where they need to go without getting lost, he said.

The terminal entrance evokes the Fort Pitt Tunnel's grand entry to Downtown Pittsburgh. Mr. Vidal modeled it after the dynamic color-changing flower petals he observed on a trip to the Phipps Conservatory. The tunnel changes colors based on the shades of the sky outside, creating a connection between passengers and what they're going to find once they leave the terminal.

"People are going to be taking selfies inside that tunnel," Mr. Vidal said.

Private restrooms

Some of the airport's other technological aspects are a bit more understated.

The terminal's funnel-shaped design will be so easy to traverse that it will render directional signs unnecessary, Mr. Vidal said

"That was one of our goals," he said. "You don't really need to stop and read anything because it's so intuitive," he said.

Four outdoor terraces — two landside, two airside — will be open to the public.

"You don't need to be a VIP or a business class passenger," Mr. Vidal said.

Then there are the restrooms. The terminal's 10 facilities will be spread across three levels and are designed for comfort.

"It's probably the one thing that everybody uses while they're at the airport," Ms. Sponza said.

Expect large restrooms with soft lighting and deep stalls — with nearly floor-to-ceiling doors that eliminate awkward eye contact, she said.

"You want the space to just sort of decompress," she said. "I think that kind of allows you that additional privacy."

The new terminal is "faithful" to its original design, Mr. Vidal said.

Ms. Sponza said it's even better.

"There's some things that renderings can't capture," she said. "I kept looking up at the clerestory windows, and I was like, 'Wow, this is so much more beautiful from this vantage point than I ever imagined.' It was pretty amazing."

Mr. Vidal hopes the new terminal will make Pittsburgh the envy of the American aviation industry.

"I think Pittsburgh will become a source of inspiration," he said. "We will showcase what can be done."

This story was updated to clarify the architectural firms' roles in the terminal project.

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